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A Nation Drenched in Bickering STAT

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The Nicaraguan debacle this week in Congress is sure to bring a new wave of recriminations in a nation already drenched with partisan bickering.

Now that the House has rejected all forms of aid to the rebels in Nicaragua, Republicans are itching to charge Democrats with losing Central America. To the GOP it looks as if the United States is now breaking faith with the rebels, abandoning them in their hour of peril.

After the House rejected President Reagan's aid proposal Tuesday, Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega announced that he was about to set off for Moscow, which confirms the communist ties of his regime. As the Sandinistas now consolidate power in Managua, Republicans want to leave little doubt who is responsible. The White House may have lost the fight, but many of the President's friends think that they have won an issue that they can bludgeon the Democrats with for a long time to come.

In turn, the Democrats charge the Republicans with sheer incompetence—first in executing the policy and then in selling it. Were it not for the CIA's heavy-handed tactics in mining the ports and sponsoring assassination manuals, and had Reagan been more careful in his rhetoric, they say, his policy might have been supportable. As it was, the policy wasn't working.

Some conservatives join the Democrats in criticizing the Reagan White House. They think that the President failed to rally the country to his cause (he turned down aide Patrick Buchanan's recommendation for a national television address on Nicaragua), and they believe that the President's foreign-policy advisers were too quick to capitulate in search of a compromise. Administration insiders say that Buchanan himself thought that the compromise supported by Reagan represented a sellout.

Moderate Republicans are griping about the White House, too. They argue that the President's staff badly mishandled the issue by scheduling the congressional votes

just as the budget fight got under way. Had the White House postponed the vote on aid for the *contras* until summer, as GOP leaders Bob Dole and Bob Michel recommended, moderates believe that chances of passage would have been higher.

There is merit in all these charges. But what do they prove? That our politics will probably become drearier and meaner than ever.

The finger-pointing cannot disguise the critical fact that U.S. foreign policy in Central America is now in shambles.

Congress has tossed out the Reagan plan and left nothing in its place. Not since pulling the plug on Vietnam and refusing aid to rebels in Angola a decade ago has Congress handcuffed a President so badly.

But instead of recriminations the country now has a strong interest in trying to reassemble the outlines of a policy.

Clearly, not much can be expected from this Congress. Leadership must rest where it always should in foreign policy: with the Chief Executive. Reagan can be permitted some sharp jabs at his opponents, but in time he must put the congressional votes behind him and move on.

One alternative that some of his allies are pushing is to stand back, let the Sandinistas show more of their true colors, and next fall come back to Congress and ask for \$28 million in new aid for the *contras*. By that time, it is presumed, even the Democrats will recognize the folly of giving the communists a new foothold in the hemisphere.

That passive approach might work, but it leaves the Administration hostage to the rulers in Managua. In effect, the Sandinistas can string out the United States, making a small concession here and there but all the while tightening their grip. Meanwhile, the *contra* forces could easily fall apart.

A second approach is to resubmit the issue immediately to Congress in the form of new legislation. Hours after the final vote by the House, Reagan advisers said that they were actively pursuing that alternative and might even seek new votes in the next few days. Yet the chances are that this will fail too, and that Congress will only reinforce the message that the United States is "bugging out."

The Administration would seem better advised to begin quietly but aggressively pulling together the other nations of Central America and, working with the Contadora Group, developing a strategy having widespread regional support. Until now the Administration has often been seen as playing a lone hand. Lack of Contadora support was a devastating indictment of the "peace plan" that Reagan unveiled a few weeks ago.

Reagan is a man of strong views, but, in putting those views into practice, he succeeds by first building coalitions of support. In this case he needs a coalition within Central America; then he can return to the task, perhaps even more difficult, of building a coalition among the squabbling factions in Congress.

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